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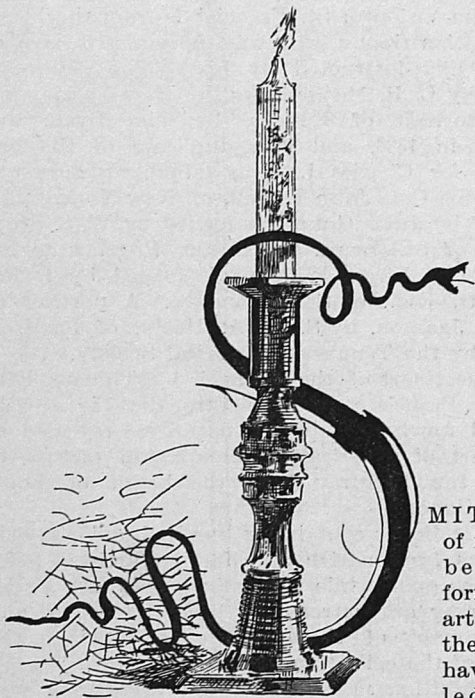
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## FRENCH ORNAMENTAL IRON WORK.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

I.



NOTHING of iron into beautiful forms is an art in which the French have excelled from the earliest

times. The old Gauls were clever smiths, and in the middle ages the class of smiths which we call locksmiths and the French call *serruriers*, formed one of the most important of all the trade corporations.

Gothic art, in liberating the smith as it liberated the stone cutter, made labor a joy instead of a penalty, and in the Gothic churches, while the capitals and friezes and bas-reliefs contain the story of the beliefs, the souvenirs, the hopes, the whole existence of those who made them, the hinged and floriated arabesques that strengthen the oaken doors, the altar rails, the gratings and screens, record the old smiths' delight in graceful form, inspired by observation of nature and their prodigious skill in twisting the hard metal and bending it to all the caprices of their exuberant fancy.

Of the iron work of the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, we have happily many examples left in the shape of railings and door fittings, or *pentures* as they are called, wrought with the hammer and with the rare aid of a stamp for often-repeated ornaments. Such is the iron work in the cathedrals of Chartres, Beauvais, Rouen, Reims, and Notre Dame de Paris, the latter so beautiful that popular admiration could not comprehend its execution without supposing the intervention of the devil.

The hinges of Notre Dame, so graceful and rich in design, spread their flowery and leafy branches over almost the entire surface of the great doors, and grasp firmly the immense mass of timber which it is their duty to bind together and consolidate. Like all the art work of the middle ages, these *pentures* are designed in accordance with the principle that the province of art is to decorate and enrich something which is in itself useful and true. The doors in those days were necessarily heavy and solid and needed strengthening with these braces and bands of iron.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the invention of the file enabled the smiths to produce those wonderful door knockers and locks and keys of which many specimens exist in the Louvre and Cluny museums and in private collections, and which often reproduce in iron the slender grace of late Gothic architecture. In the sixteenth century the smiths perfected their art still further on the side of delicacy and exquisiteness of work.

Sheet iron is introduced for making ornaments which are riveted on to the forged parts, and fine work such as caskets, mirror frames, scissor cases, are finished with the graver and chisel and with niello work in gold, silver, or brass. Indeed the fine iron work of the sixteenth century is as delicate as goldsmith's work, and the repoussé and chiseled caskets of this epoch rival in beauty the armor of the famous Spanish and Italian artists.

The iron gates in the gallery of Apollo in the Louvre, composed of forged iron arabesques and repoussé foliage of sheet iron, the whole finished, filed and polished with the greatest perfection, are sixteenth century work.

From the sixteenth up to the end of the eighteenth century, the locksmiths, supported by the aristocracy, had occasion to exercise their

talent on gates, balconies, balustrades, lustres, lanterns, locks for interior use, etc. During these two centuries civil architecture in France applied to the smiths for a variety of ornamental work which called forth even more diverse skill than the requirements of the ecclesiastical architecture of the middle ages, and so, up to the revolution, the smith's art was held in high esteem and excited great public interest.

Bachaumont, for instance, in his *Secret Memoire* relates that in November, 1767, the public went in crowds to admire a new railing placed in the choir of Saint Germain l'Auxerrois, and adds that the chapter of the church, after deliberation, voted in its enthusiasm a gratification of 12,000 livres to the artist (Deumier of the Rue du Carrousel) over and above the agreed price of 38,000 livres.

In 1772 the appreciation of the art was still such that a simple smith named Gérard could devote ten years to forging and chiseling a dais and baldachin in iron for which he asked 50,000 livres. Then came the invention of cast iron and nineteenth century ideas of cheapness and economy, and the beautiful art of forging fell into complete decay together with the other industrial arts, during the first half of the present century.

Happily, during the past thirty years, the art has been revived, and at present France possesses smiths who are in no way inferior to their glorious ancestors, and who enjoy as great esteem and as generous a patronage as our modern society can extend to any industrial art.

But before speaking about the modern revival of the art, we may perhaps with advantage consider some of the work of the last two centuries and see what principles guided the artists. It would be interesting, too, to go even further back and study the Gothic and Renaissance iron work, but this might lead us into esthetic and archaeological reflections which hardly enter into the practical character of this journal. In the work of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, on the other hand, we find iron work applied very much as it now is in the adornment of domestic architecture.

The great seventeenth century architect, Blondel, quaintly says that the usefulness of iron work in exterior decoration "is all the greater as it serves as a guarantee against the annoyances and dangerous accidents to which the neighborhood of the high road exposes us without destroying the view, and it separates gardens from one another without depriving us of the pleasure of seeing them." It was to this century and the following that we owe the many splendid gates and railings and balustrades which are still to be seen all over France, in private houses, in the royal château, and around public places.

Such is the railing in front of the Palace of Justice at Paris enriched with gilt ornaments, and such the numerous monumental works in iron executed at Nancy by Jean Lamour, both for the town of Nancy and for King Stanislas of Poland, who did so much to beautify the Lorraine city.

Jean Lamour has left a splendid folio on iron work full of engravings of his masterpieces and entitled: "Recueil des ouvrages de serrurerie que Stanislas le Bienfaisant, Roy de Pologne, Duc de Lorraine et de Bar, a fait poser sur la Place Royale de Nancy, à la gloire de Louis le Bien aimé, composé et exécuté par Jean Lamour, son serrurier ordinaire, avec un discours sur l'art du serrurier et plusieurs autres dessins de son invention (1767)." This immense folio, with its engraved text surrounded by beautiful allegorical borders, takes its place beside Duhamel du Monceau's *Art du Serrurier* (1767), Robert Davesne's *Livre de serrurerie nouvellement inventé* (1676), and Mathurin Jousse's *Fidèle ouverture du serrurier* (1627), as one of the most ingenious of those precious treatises in which the great smiths of the past have laid down the bases and principle of their difficult art. I mention these four volumes as being of peculiar interest to all who care to study the art of forging, and as being absolutely indispensable in a good art library.

Jean Lamour's greatest work is the palisading and archways around the Place Stanislas at Nancy, one of the finest specimens of the grandiose architecture and decoration of the eighteenth century. The Place Stanislas is a vast quadrilateral with the corners filled in, or as the French say *à pans coupés*, and surrounded by large houses constructed on a uniform plan after the manner of the Place Vendôme and the Place Royale des Vosges at Paris.

The façade, adorned with Corinthian pilasters, comprises two flats above the ground floor, the lofty windows of which are decorated with rich wrought iron balconies made by Lamour. Two corners of the quadrilateral are occupied by Lamour's beautiful palisading, in the openings of which are placed fountains by Barthélemy Guibal,

the principal motives of which are groups representing Neptune and Amphitrite. Through the railing, with its rich green and gold ornaments, are seen trees and gardens; in the middle of the square is an equestrian statue and the end of the square facing the fountains is occupied by the townhall. It is truly a magnificent and majestic whole, this place Stanislas, and does eternal credit to its architect Héré.

Jean Lamour's palisading, of which we give an illustration, unfortunately without the beautiful background of trees and verdure and its setting of stately mansions, is certainly as remarkable a monument of the smith's art as ever was made. When it is said that the greatest height of this palisading is very nearly forty feet, the reader will be able to form some idea of its monumental character, and to understand how great an event the completion of this work was. Not only at Nancy, but at Paris, everybody was talking about it, and Servandoni, the architect of Saint Sulpice, made a journey from Paris expressly to see Lamour's *grilles* and balconies, and confessed when he saw them that he could never have believed that smith's work could be carried to such a degree of perfection. And indeed we can only re-echo Servandoni's astonishment when we think that every part of these immense railings and gratings was executed with the hammer and anvil out of sheet and bar iron, welded and riveted together so nicely and exactly that it almost needs a magnifying glass to distinguish the joints.

The greatest piece of smith's work of the present century, namely the gates and railing of the Parc Monceau, cannot be compared with Jean Lamour's work; it is not really smith's work in the old sense of the term, for the simple reason that all the ornaments are of cast iron and the whole is roughly put together with rivets. The Parc Monceau gates are showy, thanks chiefly to the gilding, and the design is handsome, but the execution is nothing to be proud of.

However, these gates of the Parc Monceau were the beginning of the resuscitation of the smith's art, which, under the influence of Viollet-le-Duc, first began to exercise itself on the restoration of church iron work, and gradually to work its way into civil architecture and replace the heavy and unartistic cast iron balconies and gratings which had prevailed exclusively up to about 1850. Since then the art of *fer forgé* has gradually gained ground until now it has become one of the most flourishing of the modern French industrial arts.

Its products are used in interior decoration in the shape of balustrades, fire irons and candelabra, where the style of furnishing permits, while exteriorly it is used for doors, gates, window grating, and, above all, for the balconies which decorate the façade of every French house and give so much variety to an architecture which of necessity would tend, otherwise, to become monotonous.

In all the private houses that have been built in Paris within the past twenty years, fine forged iron has found a place in the permanent or at least in the movable decoration; cast iron is nowhere admitted where any pretensions are shown to artistic merit, and so once more the smith's art has reconquered its old lustre.

In my next article I shall give a description of the practical part of the smith's art and explain to the reader, as well as words can, how our modern French smiths make the balustrades and other masterpieces of *fer forgé* which are being used in the construction of fine modern houses in Paris and in the provinces.

Even thus, my essay will be incomplete, for I shall have said nothing about one very important branch of the smith's art, namely, the making of locks, keys, and door fittings. Now-a-days, however, it is more usual to make the exterior and decorated part of these fittings of brass.

Furthermore, much has been written about this part of the subject in many books, and all the wonderful locks, keys and door knockers of the past centuries have been reproduced over and over again in various publications, so that I may be excused for neglecting a subject about which I have nothing new to say, the more so as, so far as I know, few writers have touched upon the theory and practice of the grander and more difficult parts of the modern smith's art which we propose to examine together next month.

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